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Ekoji Buddhist Temple

by Matthew Moynihan

On November 29, 2015 I attended a service at the Ekoji Buddhist Temple in Fairfax Station, Virginia at 11am. It is located at 6500 Lakehaven Ln, Fairfax Station, VA 22039. The Ekoji Temple practices Shin Buddhism which means it shares the practices of the 12th century Japanese monk, Shinran Shonin. The presiding official of the service was Ken Nakamura.

The Ekoji Buddhist Temple is located on a side road that is surrounded by nature. If you were to attend in the spring you would get to see the beautiful dogwood trees out front in bloom. As you walk up to the temple, you notice a statue of what I assume is a Buddhist monk. When you enter the temple you are first met with a sign that indicates that you should remove your shoes and place them in a nearby closet. After you remove your shoes you can enter the temple which is directly in front.

The temple has roughly 100 individual padded chairs. On Sunday there were approximately 35 people in attendance from what seemed like all walks of life. About 40% of those in attendance were of Asian descent, 30% Caucasian, and the rest included Latino and African American. The dominate gender was definitely woman with approximately 65%. There were some young adults in attendance but, the majority of people looked to be from ages 30 – 70. It was hard to determine the social class of people in attendance because everyone was dressed pretty plainly but, based

on the cars in the parking lot it seemed like they were from middle to lower-middle class.

No one greeted people walking into the temple, and once seated in the temple I did not notice anyone talking. A lot of the people actually had their eyes closed, presumably in meditation. I was very comfortable just sitting there waiting for the service to start. The incense that was burning had a very calming effect on the room. After the service I realized it was not necessary to have anyone sit and explain things to me based on how self-explanatory the service was. There was also a helpful service guide that was located on each chair.

The service started with a lady telling everyone who the presiding official was and explaining that he was going to lead us in beginning meditation. Then two men entered from the front of the Temple and sat down after bowing to each other. Then a singing bowl (a gong sounding instrument) was struck many times while everyone sat meditating with their eyes closed. It was a fairly dramatic opening that seemed very ritualistic. This lasted about two minutes and then we started reciting the Vanadana Ti Sarana in Japanese. There was an English translation which helped show that it was about the three treasures of Buddhism: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Next there was a Sutra chant and the guide said that this part could be a meditative practice, and just to feel the oneness from the sounds rather than

understand the words that were being spoken. This really seemed to fit into the whole theme of the service of oneness.

After the chanting there was a Dharma message or a homily. The presiding official, Ken Nakamura, gave a homily about treating everyone regardless of faith as the same. He talked about how he was on vacation during the Paris attacks and how we should not judge someone simply based on their religion. He said he noticed a lot of people were angry at people simply because they were of Islamic faith. He said that this was a dangerous road and we should practice loving one another. The message was supposed to show how Buddhism can help us in our daily lives.

After the Dharma message, everyone in the temple sang a Gatha which was just a song sung in English. The song was about how beautiful the earth was. Almost everyone in the temple participated in the singing. After the Gatha, there was a collection which is an expression of gratitude and sharing we have for one another. I was surprised by how generous everyone was. Almost every single person donated money to the collection. After the collection the official struck the singing bowl with his wooden rod and we entered another meditation. This one lasted a bit longer than the opening meditation.

Next came the Oshoko burning of incense. It was very ritualistic and it is an act of purification. Everyone formed two lines and approached the incense burner. You would bow, approach the incense burner, place incense in the burner, bow again, and then bow to the official before going back to your seat. People had their hands in Gassho, meaning they were placed together palm to palm in a prayer-like

fashion.

There were some announcements and a final recitation of the Nembutsu before the service concluded. There was a lot of participation from the congregation during the entire service. It was fairly reserved though. The entire service seemed to focus on the idea of “oneness” and this was reaffirmed in the service book and the Dharma message. The entire service lasted about 50 minutes and after people congregated outside the temple and talked. •

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